OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE FAULT OF THE FOG

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

THAT Aubrey Watson was a nice boy nearly every one agreed; but he was my unlucky star. We were all right as long as we went our separate ways, but let either of us deviate from the path and there was a crash that could be heard.

The first time I met him I lost my dancing slipper in the middle of the floor; it was an idiotic hare-and-hounds figure anyhow. The next day he came to call and dropped one of mother's Doulton tea-cups. Then he took me to drive—I think with the idea of a ramble through tree-bordered lanes, as a change from the prosaic motor-car—and the trap lost a wheel!

I don't think now that he was awkward, although I did at the time. He made an effort to explain after the driving accident, that when he came near me, he was so dazzled he was not responsible. But I reminded him that even his being dazzled would scarcely take a wheel off.

Then one night, when Paul, our chauffeur, was ill with tonsillitis, mother and I took Fate into our hands, and agreed to let Aubrey Watson drive us in his new motor car to the Country Club. You know, of course, what happened—how he insisted on taking the beach road, so I could see the moon on the water (every man I know shows me the same moon on the same water) how the tide was coming in, how one big breaker after another washed up around us, swirling over the floor of the car, carrying off mother's lorgnette and my fan, while we stood on the seats and told Aubrey Watson how we enjoyed this moonlight bathing, and not to worry—we could easily order a dozen or two point lace fans and shell lorgnettes in the morning, and how the author of our rambles sat there, refusing to move, gritting his teeth with rage, lighting match after match between breakers to see if the batteries were dry.

Of course, they weren't dry; there was nothing dry about the car except the roof. When it was all over and the sea was merely playing sportively around the trees, Aubrey got out to inspect the damage. It must have been plenty, for after a lot of pushing around the spark and the throttle, of pumping up the pressure and lighting matches to look at the indicator, of taking off the hood and smashing it on savagely, we still stayed firmly where we were. Aubrey tried to crank up but the engine merely turned over on its other side with a grunt and went to sleep again. It was, as you will imagine, a unique situation.

After a while one of the acetylene lamps went out and the car looked like a dog asleep with one eye open. Finally when neither coaxing nor veiled profanity availed anything, we got out, mother and I, and ankle deep in wet sand we walked and walked—and then we walked. It was two o'clock when we reached the Country Club and were put to bed, wrapped up in blankets and smothered in hot water bottles. The Van Dunep girls, who went down to bathe at eight o'clock the next morning, met Aubrey Watson, still in the clothes he had worn on the car, and he looked as if he had been tramping the beach all night.

But, after all, that was only the beginning. The real disaster occured the following week. The Dudleys gave a lawn party, ending with a cotillion in a tent; it was every complete, everyone said, from Japanese lanterns and lots of punch to sand flies and mosquitoes. Then some idiots suggested going out to the Catamaran, a big floating raft that was anchored on the second sandbar, out in the harbor. I'd been fighting shy of Aubrey Watson all evening, so I went too. When we got to the raft it was very dark. Percy Haswell helped me up the little iron ladder and turned for someone else. Afterwards he said his foot slipped—anyhow there was a crash and he went head first into the boat. Somebody screamed and Percy groaned that his skull was fractured. There was a lot of excitement, and before I realized it the boat was headed for shore again, and I was left, stranded—or not exactly that; one cannot be stranded on the water—in the darkness. One of the girls called that they would come back for me at once, and I dropped limply on the floor of the Ca-

tamaran and stared at the rows of Japanese lanterns strung from the Dudley veranda to the Dudley trees, and from the Dudley trees out along the Dudley-dock.

When some one on the other side of the raft coughed apologetically, I nearly fell off, which would have been inconvenient—I have not reached that stage in swimming when I can take six strokes without my feet shooting out of the water and my head going down.

"You needn't be alarmed about Haswell," the voice went on savagely. "He could not fracture that thick skull of his."

"It's you, is it?" I said. "I might have known it."

"Yes, it is. It's too bad, isn't it?"

This I ignored. It was evident that it was too bad.

"May I trouble you," I asked, "to take me back in your boat?"

"Won't you stay a little while?" His tone was almost imploring. "There's a place there to the right where the swell strikes the sand, and a bit of spray flies, that looks like a mermaid."

"Oh, indeed!" This was distinctly an affront. "If I am disturbing any love affair, I——"

"You're not disturbing my love affair," he said cooly. "It is a communion of the spirit, and you do not interfere at all. In fact, I believe I like to have you around, you stimulate my imagination."

"Thanks," I said icily.

The swell at that moment lifted the raft sharply at one side and slid under the other. I sat down suddenly and tried to find something to hold to. I found it, a man's coat sleeve, and I held desperately for a minute. I glanced toward the shore; somehow the lanterns showed less plainly—from gorgeous colored butterflies against the dark they looked like pale fireflies, flashing a faint gleam at intervals.

"What is it?" I asked anxiously, as Aubrey Watson stirred uneasily and got to his feet.

"Give me your hand," he said imperatively. "You mustn't slide off, and I'll have to look around."

"It's a fog." I said suddenly; "a fog like a blanket. Hurry, we must get home."

"Say, look here," he said, sitting down again and still holding my hand. "Honestly, I would give anything if I hadn't been on this cursed raft when you got here. I've brought you the worst kind of calamities ever since I've konwn you, and upon my word, every day they grow worse. I'd give my right hand to save you trouble, and instead all I seem to do is to pull you into it."

"What is it now?" I asked with the calmness of utter despair.

"Oh, nothing," he said mildly, "except that I haven't any boat—I got the launch to land me here."

"Well, they'll be coming back, won't they?"

"Yes, they'll come back, all right, but look at the fog!"

"We can shout," I said hopefully. "And have you anything we could burn? Even a pocket handkerchief——"

"If we cannot see the glare over there," he said dismally, "it isn't likely they could see anything here."

But he obediently got out his matches and burned up his small linen, piece by piece. The result was scarcely encouraging—in the dampness there was a great deal more smoke than flame—and my white chiffon scarf went up in a perfect cascade of sparks. Still there was no result, no call came over the muggy water. I was coughing with smoke and fog, chilled with cold, smothering with indignation.

"It—it's dreadful," I broke out finally. "It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. If you come within three hundred yards of me something awful happens."

"Yes, I know it," he said dejectedly. "I'm going home in the morning——"

"If there is any morning," I choked.

"But you cannot deny," he went on more hopefully, "that here is one case where I had nothing to do with the matter, and where my being here is, to say the least, a comfort. What if you were alone?"

"If you had been back in the tent dancing with proper young ladies," I began, "instead of flirting with mermaids——"

"I came out here," he said meekly, "because the only girl I cared to dance with wouldn't dance with me."

"Perhaps you didn't ask her," I suggested.

"I didn't need to. She despises me. And when I tell her, as I shall some day, that I was born on Friday the thirteenth——"

"Look here," I said suddenly. "Don't you—haven't you a kind of queerish feeling, as if this thing is moving?"

Aubrey leaned over and peered into the darkness below. Then he loosened his grip of my arm and rose cautiously. "Don't move for anything," he said. "I'll try to find the anchor rope."

Before I realized it, he had slipped his dress coat around me, with its ridiculous tails over my shoulders, and he was down the steps, fumbling in the water underneath, before I knew what he meant to do. Something like sputtering profanity came up from below, followed by a form that stayed discreetly away from me and dripped water all over the wooden flooring of the raft.

"She's loose," he said quietly, "but I don't think she's moving much."

"Loose!" I screamed. "And with the tide going out! Why, we'll be out at sea in an hour!"

"Perhaps," he said, "but don't be nervous. With these airtight cylinders she cannot sink——"

"She can turn over," I protested wildly.

"Not when it's as smooth at this. I think, if you're sure you can hold on. I'll take the anchor rope and try to tow her a bit."

"It's too far to swim." I was ready for tears now. "Besides, which way will you go? I haven't any idea where the shore is, and I know you haven't either."

He hadn't then the courtesy to answer. He stood for a minute, I couldn't see his face, but I suppose he was deciding which way to tow. Then I heard him let himself down into the water.

The floor of the raft tilted and righted itself with every swell; my arms ached from holding to the edge of the platform, and all around that wretched fog hung like a wall. I could have battered my fists against it. Finally, I could not stand it another instant.

"Aubrey," I called frantically. "Come back here; you may get a cramp or—or something."

"Can't—I'm busy," he called through the fog.

"Come at once," I said firmly. "I shall not sit here another instant alone. "I'm—I'— so lonely, I don't know what to do."

In a moment Aubrey came around to my side of the raft and pulled himself to the edge.

"I won't come near you," he said, "I'm dripping."

"Where are we?" I demanded.

"Oh, we'll be all right," he said, with an effort at cheerfulness. "Somebody'll find us."

"We may be run down," I shuddered. "We're probably in the open sea by this time. And it's growing rougher, too."

Aubrey sat down on the very edge, and reaching over gingerly took my hand.

"We'll hope for the best," he said, "but I want to tell you something, so that if—well, so that you will always remember whatever happens——"

"Don't," I said, shivering. "Whatever happens to you will happen to me."

"Will it? Do you mean that, sweetheart? Do you mean that you are willing to share my fate, my life, perhaps my death?"

"Oh, Aubrey, don't; I cannot bear it," I said. Don't talk about your death—it's too terrible."

The fog was lifting a little now. I could see his face dimly.

"Then we'll both live," he said decisively. "With your love——"

"I didn't say I loved you——" I began, but he stopped me.

"With your love, I'm ready for any endeavor," he said, leaning toward me. "I think I know a way—"

"What is it?" I cried.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

"What is it?"

"Are you wiling to marry me and risk the hoodoo—to——"

"Yes, yes," I said frantically, "but what is the way——"

"You will marry me, positively, not later than November—no, October?"

"Yes, September, if you like," I assented, "only tell me."

He leaned over and kissed me quickly. Then he laughed joyously, exultantly.

"Look behind you, sweetheart," he said. And there, emerging slowly from the fast thinning fog, was the Dudley launch, while just behind, still a trifle pale, the Dudley lanterns gleamed yellow and red on the shore.

"Then—then—" I stammered, "it was all——"

"A mixture of Fate and falsehood," he said, as he kissed me. "We haven't moved an inch."

"You have lost a suit," I said, glancing at his dripping clothes.

"I have gained my suit," he said idiotically.

AT PAILLARD'S

By Montague Glass

WHAT is Paillard's? An oasis in the desert; a bit of Paris transplanted between two sky-scrapers,, a haven for the weary and an infallible remedy for the nostalgic Frenchman.

Broadway swirls at its very doors; through its open windows in the summer comes the wailing cry of the newsboy, the clang of the trolley gong, the automobile horn and sometimes a warning scream from the engine-house around the corner. But these are far away once you enter its portals, for this is France.

At half-past five, Paillard's is crowded to its doors, for this is the hour of the anteprandial absinthe and your true Parisian must have an apéritif or go dinnerless. So there they sit, hatted or hatless, in chattering groups, and watch the little dropper tick-tock with clock-like regularity until their goblets are full of the milky, iridescent fluid that whets their appetites for the meal to follow.

Then there is the pompier, a mild thirst quencher composed of—but you shall learn for yourselves.

It was a cold day without, and a dry, fine snow fell and was scattered by a teeth-chattering wind—a freezing blast that huddled you into your overcoat and almost swept you past the revolving door. With a great effort you ducked under the hood of the porte-cochère, inserted yourself in a division of the door and a polite attendant whirled you into the thick of things.

What grateful warmth! What a faint aromatic smell of cigarettes, coffee and a hundred liqueurs and beverages! So you, or rather I, sank with a sigh of relief on the divan and Jacques the waiter saw me from the vantage of the cashier's desk and nodded reassuringly. Another moment and a demi-tasse of coffee steamed in front of me. And now I felt warm. A faint moisture of sheer luxury stood on my forehead.

"Dis, done!" I crooked my fingers at Jacques.

"Pompier," I said.

"Pompier," he murmured and hastened away.

Then enters the man with the whiskers. There are plenty of men with whiskers, with beards of such amplitude that you are constrained to wonder how they care for them, endure them, or better still, if they are married men, how their wives endure them.

And so the wearer of these perfect furies of whiskers—these bushy, thorny, turbulent whiskers—entered Paillard's and, with a smile that I deduced from divers movements of his beard, sat himself down at my table.

"What a day!" he said, shaking his head.

"What a land!" he continued:

I nodded and waggled by turns.

Then came Jacques with my pompier, and the man with whiskers lay back in his circular seat and roared with merriment.

You fortify yourself against snow with ice," he said; "but in this country one does strange things, what?"

He turned to Jacques.

"Bring me one, too," he said.

Then Jacques returned, bottle-laden and alert, Three bottles and a siphon. He placed them carefully on the table, first a tall slope-necked bottle on the one side, so; next a bulging-necked black bottle on the other side, so. Then take the first bottle and pour into the bottom of a goblet a generous modicum. That's vermouth—vermifuge—tart and aromatic. Then from the other bottle, pour much or little, as you have a sweet tooth or not. That's cassis, sugary and thick, a liqueur made of black currants. Now drop in your ice, two cubes, and fill it up with carbonic water from the siphon. Stir vigirously with the spoon and v'là—there's your pompier!

"Delicious!" said the man with the whiskers. "Most refreshing!".

He smacked his lips and plied his serviette roughly acrboss, through, up and along his beard and moustache until they had assumed the proper degree of ferocity. Then he pulled from his pocket that unmistakable badge of the tourist, a Cook circular ticket.

"Voilá, m'sieu'," he continued, "in this country everything is big, your railroad tickets, for instance. I travel to Cincinnati and return. They sell me a ticket, a whole volume when folded, a telescope unfolded. It is immense. It is gigantic. So also are your high buildings. I go to the top of one and feel that I must jump. I must throw myself over the parapet. It is astonishing, but, mind you," he paused to run a white hand though his hair, "very amusing; no less, m'sieu', than that; very amusing."

"It is fortunate that you resisted the impulse," I said.

"Fortunate!" he exclaimed, and burst into a loud laugh. "I have had my lesson fifteen years ago. All my life, m'sieu', I have been subject to such impulses. I see in the street a pretty girl, very pretty. Do I kiss her? I want to, I admit, but I deny myself. What? Of course I deny myself. It is unlawful and leads to complications."

He seized his chair on the sides by both hands and jerked it nearer the table.

"I'll tell you something," he went on, confidentially, "about myself, about that lesson fifteen years ago. I was then twenty-five, a dangerous age and full of fire. The wine of youth flows in one's veins. All is impulse, but of reason and wisdom, very little. So fifteen years ago I am a young man twenty-five—eh?—accustomed to indulging my every want and very happy to do so, m'sieu' I assure you.

"No regrets, no, not one, just every day to drink my fill of wine, to gamble and to take pleasure in feminine society. I was, to confess candidly, m'sieu, a dissipated young dog.

"Well, in this way I spent my time till at last there happened the inevitable. My nerves, none too strong at their best, m'sieu', gave out, and I retired to the residence of my uncle at La Voulte. The village of La Voulte is to be compared to New York or Paris, no, not for a moment; merely a village, that's all. But in La Voulte there are convents and churches, m'sieu, I assure you, in plenty.

"The good sisters, in the robes of their order, are everywhere. I take plenty of exercise by direction of my physician, and so in walking I meet these nuns, m'sieu, wherever I go. I turn a street corner—there, face to face, is a good sister.

"La Voulte, m'sieu', is a healthy climate—fine peaches, magnificient vineyards. The wine of La Voulte is of bouquet the most delicate. Yes, m'sieu', everybody drinks wine in La Voulte, even the sisters, and everybody has a fine complexion and plump red cheeks.

"So I walk around La Voulte and encounter the sisters. Their faces are bound in white linen and long black veils fall from their heads to their feet.

"M'sieu', every time I see a sister I say to myself, 'What a droll thing, what a situation it would be, should I take my fist so, and with the index finger crooked so, chuck ever so gently the plump chin of that good sister, right underneath where it emerges from its snowy linen bandage."

"Understand me, I am sane-quite sane, m'sieu, at this time; but there is some defect of the will. So the thought preys on me continually, and I say nothing about it to anybody. At last I can stand it no longer. I will return to Paris, where there is life and the distraction of the boulevards and the theatres.

"I dare not trust myself outside the house, m'sieu', I assure you for fear I offer this trivial, this altogether silly and unnecessary affront to the good sisters. Finally I take my portmanteau and am ensconced in a first-class compartment labeled for Paris, when the door opens and in comes a religieuse.

"M'sieu', I assure you, I tremble like—like a leaf, m'sieu', like a leaf, and close my eyes. I need not open them to see those white bands, that dimpled chin, those ruddy, tempting cheeks. All these I see with my eyes closed, m'sieu', for I had caught a glimpse of her long black veil as she entered.

"Picture to yourself, m'sieu', the situation. There I sit and opposite me the good sister. I keep my eyes tight closed and listen. She has been eating the sausage and drinking the good wine of La Voulte, m'sieu', and though the meal is long past, she makes little sounds with her lips as if she relishes it anew.

"Yes, m'sieu', I listen, and to me it is maddening; it is the quintessence of irritation. For fifteen minutes she continues these sounds, and I, m'sieu, I feel that I simply must look just once, to see how she does it. Yet I know that if I but open my eyes, I am lost. So I struggle inwardly and perspire, m'sieu'. I assure you, I am wet through and through, yes, through and through I am filled with trepidation.

"But at last I can stand it no longer and so I open my eyes. Aje! I take one look and then, m'sieu', clenching my fist so, and crooking my index finger so, I chuck that good sister violently, m'sieu', with all the force of pent up energy, under her dimpled chin."

He learned back in his chair and laughed until the ice in our pompiers fairly clinked an echo. I smiled in sympathy.

"The point is not yet," he continued, again scrubbing his beard with his serviette. "The point is indeed not yet, m'sieu'."

He paused and laughed once more.

"That black veil, m'sieu', it is not the garb of a religieuse. A— oh, no," he went on. "It is the mourning veil. Yes, m'sieu, she is a widow. Eh? What do you think of that? A widow, yes, m'sieu', and it cost me two thousand francs before I was through with her. An expensive indulgence, what?" he said, struggling into his overcoat with Jacques' assistance. "But I learned my lesson, m'sieu'. I now have my impulses well in hand and so I wish you good evening."

He turned to leave and then, as an afterthought, wheeled and made a deep obeisance.

"M'sieu'," he murmured.

I rose and bowed in return.

"An revoir."

"An revoir," I replied, and in a minute the revolving door had him in its clutches and swung him out into the blustering night.